

Encouraging Participation Via a Citizens Service Center

Ialomita County, Romania

Background

Romanians have long viewed local government as unresponsive and difficult to deal with. Until 1990 City Halls and county buildings housed bureaucracies that were not geared to providing their citizens with services, information, or opportunities for participation. This image was reinforced by guard cages at building entrances, where a uniformed guard determined who could enter. While municipal leadership changed after the revolution, its reputation and image generally did not. The Vice President of Ialomita County (population 380,000) was concerned that the county was unable to give citizens information about county services and involve them in the policy issues facing the county. The elected leadership of the Council wanted to encourage citizens' questions, develop a database of information easily accessible to the public, and facilitate volunteer groups to advise the county on policy matters and assist county staff in some of its programs. To accomplish this, the county decided to establish a "Citizen's Information Center."

Innovation

In November 1995 a location for the new "Citizen's Information Center" was identified: the side entry hall of the county building in the county seat of Slobozia (population 60,000). A week later the guard cage was removed, and the guard was re-trained in customer relations. By the formal opening on April 12, 1996, the drab hall had been converted into a modern and comfortable reception center, the first handicapped accessible facility in a Romanian local government office. The county had also developed a hard-copy and computerized database of information from each county department.

The center is open during office hours. One of its resources is brochures on topics such as marriage licenses, building permits, adoption information, housing availability, functions of the city/county/state, the City and County Councils, and youth programs; more are being prepared. The center has also been stocked with printed information from local NGOs, government agencies, and other local governments. In addition, citizens can ask about street repairs and health services; whether the city, county, or state is responsible for a specific item; and who now handles many responsibilities that have been privatized, such as housing. The center has access to all county departments if it needs to obtain answers to complicated questions. The type and number of information requests are recorded, and the staff are gradually enlarging the database based on the requests. A "how to" training program and manual on setting up a citizen's center have been developed. Construction of the center cost about \$185,000; computers and equipment cost approximately \$15,000. Software was donated by a local computer programmer. The county pays the salaries of the three staff members who work at the center full time.

Results

The center averages close to 25 requests per day for information and is making constant improvements to respond to the evolving needs of its clients. A Citizen's Information Center Advisory Board and an Arts and Cultural Council have been formed. The center has been successful in improving public relations and in encouraging participation: the citizens of Ialomita County have learned that they can get quick, accurate answers to their questions at one central location and that their government can be responsive. Several citizens have also volunteered for work in the center itself. Likewise, the county staff have learned that citizens can be enthusiastic about participating in local volunteer activities. Seeing the center's achievements, the Mayor of Bucharest is developing a citizen's information center for the capital based on the Ialomita model. Ialomita has received more than twenty other requests for information and/or technical assistance.

Summary

To disseminate information about county services and to enlist citizens' advice on policy matters, Ialomita County established a "Citizen's Information Center." The center provides information about county services through printed materials and a computerized database. The center has been successful in improving public relations and in encouraging participation: the citizens have learned that their government can be responsive. Likewise, the county staff have learned that citizens can be enthusiastic about participating in local volunteer activities.

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